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ABSTRACT

As society turns increasingly to education to provide remedies for economic and social ills and to prepare citizens for life and work in a rapidly changing world, the community college is emerging as a major force in U.S. education. Recent trends indicate that U.S. productivity is lagging behind that of other countries, most notably Japan. Japan's economic success is due in large part to the fact that its blue-collar workers can interpret advanced mathematics, read complex engineering blueprints, and perform highly skilled tasks in the factories. Without a similarly well-educated work force, the U.S. cannot hope to regain a position of technological superiority in an increasingly competitive world market. Reclaiming the skills and productivity of U.S. workers demands systematic and sustained collaboration between policy makers and educators to deal efficiently with the complex interaction between the job-related educational needs of students and adults, the business community, labor, the job market, and the economy. A Presidential Counselor on Education for Employment should be appointed to coordinate all existing programs involving education, manpower training, and employment; and community colleges, working in collaboration with the business community, should provide the majority of worker training programs. The emerging economic order needs workers with imagination, confidence, initiative, and independence who can think clearly, solve problems, and exercise judgement. Appropriate curricula for these workers must provide an amalgam of liberal and vocational education designed to prepare them for satisfying and stable employment, ongoing vocational training, and the continual cultivation of the life of the mind. (ALB)

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BUILDING A WORLD-CLASS WORK FORCE:

A VISION FOR A NEW CENTURY

Marvin Feldman

March 29, 1989

Paper presented at the Futures Commission Forum held at the 69th Annual Convention of the American Association of Community and Junior Colleges, Washington, DC, March 29-April 1, 1989.

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BUILDING A WORLD-CLASS WORK FORCE
A Vision for a New Century

In 1986, the AACJC appointed the Commission on the Future of Community Colleges to review the history and appraise the status of the nations's more than 1200 community, technical and junior colleges, and propose new directions for these vital institutions in the decades ahead. After 18 months of study, nationwide consultation and soul searching, the Commission produced its first report, Building Communities: A Vision for a New Century. The response from the colleges to which the report was addressed has been tremendous.

In November, 1988, the Commission met in Washington to chart the next steps. The members resolved to produce a series of supplementary reports, the first of which would address the role of the community, technical and junior colleges in helping to achieve the full employment of the nation's workers in an increasingly competitive global

marketplace while preparing them for a satisfying and meaningful life after work.

My remarks today were prepared in conjunction with the first supplementary report. They are intended to reaffirm and elaborate on the community colleges' mission in vocational and technical education and, ideally, to convert the positive energy generated by the initial report into effective action. The goal, broadly stated, is nothing less than to reclaim the skills and productivity of the American work force.

As the Commission's first report stated, the community colleges serve a variety of constituencies. But perhaps above all, they are colleges for working people. They prepare people of all ages and conditions for the world of work, and, equally important, for life after work.

The demand for education that meets the needs of working people is increasing dramatically. Community, technical and junior colleges now enroll 43 percent of the nation's undergraduates and 51 percent of all first-time entering freshmen. And two-thirds of community college students are pursuing occupational/technical programs.

The community colleges are relatively young, and so they are flexible. They have demonstrated that they can act swiftly and effectively to meet the needs of their students and their communities. Community colleges are education's

quick-change artists. They can respond, like no other institution, to the continually changing demands of a post-industrial economy.

Community colleges are uniquely positioned to meet the needs of working people. They are the most accessible institutions in a nation committed to universal educational opportunity. They are the institutions with the most extensive and up-to-date technical offerings at a time when America urgently needs to regain its competitive position in international markets. In a nation seeking solutions to the worsening problems of unemployment and underemployment, community colleges are the institutions educating students most effectively for known job opportunties. They are the institutions preparing people most successfully for self-employment at a time when the American economy needs an infusion of entrepreneurial energy. Moreover, community colleges are in a position to lead the search for the most appropriate patterns of general education for working pepple, as the nation confronts the need for universal cultural literacy.

As our society turns increasingly to education to provide remedies for economic and social ills as well as prepare citizens for life and work in a high-tech, highly competitive and rapidly changing world, the community college is emerging as a major force in American education, and a central element in the infrastructure of American society.

Now decisive action is needed to unite the efforts of the individual colleges into a cohesive, systematic national initiative. The commission has identified three areas to be given priority: 1) to give the community colleges a voice in the formation of national and international economic and manpower policy; 2) to consolidate and expand the already extensive collaboration between the community colleges and the nation's employers; and 3) to continue the quest for an inspiring vision of the role of education in the lives of working people.

Reclaiming the Skills and Productivity of the American People

America has enjoyed -- still enjoys, compared to most nations -- remarkable prosperity. We owe it to the ingenuity, productivity and superb technical skills of the American people. That has been our greatest resource, and our finest export.

Has this changed? It seems so.

Let me mention a few items gleaned from recent publications. An article in the September 19, 1988 issue of Business Week, a special report on "Human Capital: The Decline of America's Work Force," contains, among other disheartening items, a comparison of Britain vis-a-vis the U.S. in the 1850's with the U.S. vis-a-vis Japan in the

1980's. Consider the parallels: the dominant world power; the number-two power, catching up fast. Number one marveling at the manufacturing prowess of number two (in the 19th century, it was American-made reapers and muskets, and products assembled from completely interchangeable parts; now, it's Japanese electronic wizardry). And the outcome: number one yielding manufacturing superiority -- and world position -- to the newcomer. At least that was the outcome in the U.S./Britain encounter.

According to the Business Week article, there's at least one more interesting parallel. Nineteenth-century British industrialists investigating the American system of manufacture found that American success was due largely to a highly educated work force. Ninety percent of America's free population could read and write, but only two-thirds of the British people were literate. Today, Japan's literacy rate is about 90 percent; in America it's down to about 80 percent.

The same article quotes Merry I. White, author of The Japanese Educational Challenge: "Much of the success of Japan stems from the fact that its blue-collar workers can interpret advanced mathematics, read complex engineering blueprints, and perform sophisticated tasks on the factory floor far better than blue collars in the U.S."

A front-page story in the New York Times last week reported that the Japanese are so far advanced in high-definition television technology -- which is expected to be a $25 billion industry by the year 2000 -- that it may be impossible for the U.S. to catch up, particularly since we have already abandoned the manufacture of such technologies as high-capacity memory chips, video cassette recorders and editing equipment which are necessary for the production of HDTV.

And one last item. According to an article in the spring, 1989 issue of Best of Business Quarterly, opinion polls in Japan show an increase in the number of Japanese who believe they have nothing more to learn from the West, including the U.S. At this moment, I'm not interested in whether America has anything to teach Japan; that's not the issue. And I'm not criticizing Japan. The Japanese people have worked hard and their achievements have been remarkable. Indeed, I value the mutually beneficial relationship between our two nations.

My concern is the perception of America as a second-rate nation, as a nation in decline. That notion, once unthinkable, is now all too familiar. It stings, but less than it used to. I think it should scare the hell out of every American.

America is rapidly losing -- and in some fields has already lost -- the technical superiority that has been the base of our prosperity. We can't wait much longer. We must begin a concerted effort to regain our position in increasingly competitive world markets.

We cannot do this without a highly skilled, highly educated work force. We cannot do this while many Americans are unskilled or underskilled. We cannot do this while too many young people are "mis-educated" -- by this I mean they are not learning the skills needed to fill available jobs. Mis-education wreaks terrible hardships on these people; they remain unemployed or underemployed, while jobs go begging because too few Americans have the skills to fill them. Clearly, education -- and particularly, education for work -- must play an important role in reclaiming the skills and productivity of the American people. The key is a major reshaping of our educational system, and a new policy that recognizes the essential role of community colleges in the effort to rebuild a strong, competitive American work force.

A Coordinated Approach to Education for Employment

Full employment will always be a central concern of an economically advanced democratic society. But our approach to achieving it is changing elementally. After a full half-century of economic manipulations designed to produce stable full employment, 52% of blacks aged 16 to 24 are unemployed, 32% of young Hispanics are unemployed and 20% of young whites are unemployed.

We have learned painfully that a rising economic tide does not lift all boats; it lifts some and sinks others. So some once universally held economic premises are being called into question. There is a gathering consensus that education must be the basis of stable full employment.

Policymakers are at last recognizing the central importance of appropriate, effective vocational education and re-education in the achievement of the nation's economic goals. We have no choice but to undertake the difficult task of training and retraining each individual worker for a job we know exists.

National economic policy can no longer be formed in the half-light of economic considerations alone. There must be systematic and sustained collaboration between policymakers and representatives of the educational community -- particularly those most directly concerned with the appropriate and effective preparation of working people for

the world of work. There must be a searching review of policymaking machinery at every level to assure that education is adequately represented.

Numerous programs have been devised, costing billions of dollars, and spread throughout many government agencies, federal, state and local, to make up for the deficiencies of the educational system in meeting its traditional function of career preparation. We have a proliferation of vocational, manpower, apprentice, rehabilitation, and other programs. The result is duplication, overlap, inefficiency and waste, as the various bureaucracies compete with one another.

Despite this multiplicity of programs, neither our schools nor our training efforts are serving all the needs of youth, adults, business, our communities, or our society as a whole. We are not producing the skilled workers our economy requires. Many of our social ills, such as crime, drug abuse and welfare dependency, can be traced, at least in part, to our failure to meet the employment needs of youth, and the retraining needs of adults.

A coordinated approach is needed to deal efficiently with the complex interaction of the job-related education and training needs of students and adults, the business community, labor, the job market and the nation's economy. Current programs are spread throughout federal, state and

local agencies, and too often one agency is unaware of the related activities of another. Sometimes they are actually working at cross-purposes.

Therefore, it is recommended that the President appoint a Presidential Counselor on Education for Employment, to coordinate all existing programs involving education, manpower training, and employment, using our community colleges as the chief deliverer of most programs. The goal is a coordinated, cohesive, national policy on job-related education and training, and a flexible and responsive operational capability to back up that policy.

The purpose is not the creation of new programs, or the expenditure of additional funds. It is to get the most out of existing programs, do away with the duplication and waste which currently exist, eliminate competition between programs, and overcome the present lack of knowledge and information.

The President can take the initiative, through executive order, by assigning the responsibility and authority to his new counselor on education for re-directing twenty-five percent of the discretionary funds currently available within appropriate agencies, and redistributing them on an incentive principle to programs which place highest emphasis on education for employment.

One of the key concerns of the Presidential Counselor should be to provide much closer coordination between the vocational and training programs. Emphasis should be placed on coordinating all guidance, counseling, and placement activities. The U.S. Employment Service, Bureau of Labor Statistics, National Center for Educational Statistics, Veterans Administration counseling and outreach programs, armed forces recruitment programs, and counseling and placement programs in the schools should all be attuned to each other. Curriculum development activities should also be tied in to many of the above programs, so that short-range, as well as long-range and traditional programs can be developed to meet pressing needs.

Employer-Educator Partnerships

The nation is finally confronting the educational consequences of the electronics revolution. The demand for unskilled manufacturing workers is declining while the demand for technicians in manufacturing and in the exploding service sectors is increasing. Most, though by no means all, of the jobs uneducated people can do will soon be done by increasingly sophisticated electronically controlled machines. This means that most uneducated people will have to get an education to get and keep a job.

Moreover, futurists agree that the principal characteristic of the post-industrial society is continuous rapid change -- on a permanent basis. Products, processes and patterns of service will change constantly, and skills will become obsolete at an increasingly rapid rate. Workers will have to relearn their jobs or learn entirely new ones with increasing frequency. And education will require increasing flexibility, offering a widening variety of options that can be continuously redesigned to meet changing needs.

Another phenomenon of the twentieth century is a growing recognition of the diversity of educational providers. Technology has altered the educational task in two elemental ways: there is much, much more to learn than ever before, and there are many new ways -- and places -- to learn.

We learn by ourselves -- unassisted -- and electronics is greatly expanding the scope of that process. We learn from our families. We learn from friends, and from a growing complex of organizations, some explicitly educational, some not; some public, some private and some proprietary.

The educational system of the past is being replaced by an intricate non-system. The centers of educational initiative are multiplying: electronically-equipped households, museums, religious groups, youth groups, factories and offices, schools and colleges, and many, many more. And running in and around and through these entities

like glue is the presence of the community college -- sometimes supplementing these other resources, sometimes strengthening them, sometimes moving boldly into a gap, sometimes withdrawing from a field in which alternatives are adequate, sometimes simply certifying the educational results achieved in other learning environments.

In vocational education, by far the largest of these nontraditional learning resources is the business community. The business contribution to the education of working people is vast, varied and growing. In size it is second only to the contribution of the community colleges. There is naturally a rich tradition of collaboration between business and community colleges. The time has come to strengthen and expand that collaboration.

The work-related activities of education and business must be carefully integrated -- in forecasting changing skill requirements, in designing and redesigning curricula, in planning a systematic division of educational tasks, and, increasingly, in placing workers.

In its first phase, industrialization typically resulted in rigidly hierarchical organizations in which a handful of managers directed the primarily physical labors of a presumably unthinking work force. What industry needed was people who would do what they were told.

That is changing. Now that even the most complex manual functions are being automated, business needs people who will do what, in a sense, they cannot be told. The emerging economic order needs people not just with particular skills, but with imagination, courage, confidence, initiative and independence. We need workers who can think clearly, solve problems, and exercise judgment.

This development permits a much more hopeful, forward-looking, dynamic vision of the future of post-industrial humans than the melancholy view of the early critics of industrialization. Today, working people are increasingly seen not as interchangeable units in a great grey mass called the work force, but as individuals, autonomous and self-supervising, who not only function independently at work, but look forward to a rich and intense life after work.

John Dewey asked decades ago how a "material industrial civilization" could be converted "into a distinctive agency

for liberating the minds and refining the emotions of all who take part in it." Dewey believed it was up to educators -- that the quality of American life would ultimately be determined by how they inter-related technical and liberal studies.

But we have so far failed to achieve that liberating ideal. The 1985 Humanities Commission was echoing Dewey when it called for a renewed sense of "common culture rooted in civilization's lasting vision, its highest shared ideals and aspirations....Otherwise," the Commission continued, "students are left to believe without judgment, decide without wisdom and act without standards."

This idea of an amalgam of liberal with vocational education ran contrary to the perceived requirements of the industrial era. However, the post-industrial era not only permits but <u>requires</u> a greatly enlarged vision of the human possibilities of working people. We are discovering that there is life after work, not merely an emptiness to be filled with passive entertainments, recreational chemicals and a bored indolence. In other words, we can now define educational excellence in a way that has meaning for everyone -- that acknowledges the essentiality of saleable skills <u>and</u> a sense of place and meaning.

As the distinction between vocational and general or liberal education continues to blur, the familiar idea of lifetime education is finding its natural home in the

community college, both for the continuing vocational training the times require and for the continuing cultivation of the life of the mind for everyone.

* * * *

As we approach the year 2000, many of our highest hopes for working people may well be within reach. We have the means -- if we have the will -- to provide suitable, satisfying and stable employment for everyone. Moreover, we have the means to provide everyone the opportunity to participate fully and intelligently in the social process of building community, and to live a meaningful, purposeful and fulfilling life.

Community colleges are ready to play a central role in the achievement of these goals.

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